REPORT

OF THE INVESTIGATION

INTO

THE OPERATION OF

THE INTEGRATED CALL CENTRE

July 2003

Office of The Ombudsman

Hong Kong

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Investigation Report

The Operation of the Integrated Call Centre

Introduction

The Integrated Call Centre (ICC), managed by the Efficiency Unit (EU) of the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office of the Government Secretariat, was set up to provide a one-stop service for enquiries and complaints. Starting in July 2001, ICC has progressively taken over the operation of over 60 hotlines formerly operated by 12 Government departments. Since then, the Office of The Ombudsman had received complaints about ICC's handling of public enquiries and complaints. They were indicative of problems in the operation of ICC, best resolved before further expansion of ICC.

No. of complaints received by	ICC	The Ombudsman
July 2001 – September 2002	69	16
October 2002 – May 2003	74	14
Total	143	30

2. The Ombudsman, therefore, declared a direct investigation under Section 7(1)(a)(ii) of The Ombudsman Ordinance on 4 October 2002.

Ambit

3. The ambit of the investigation covers :

(a) the intended and actual operation of ICC in responding to public enquiries and complaints;

(b) arrangements adopted by ICC for :

(i) referring to the responsible Government organisations those enquiries and/or complaints which ICC cannot respond to immediately,

(ii) monitoring responses of Government organisations to these referrals;

(iii) replying to the enquirer/complainant; and

(iv) keeping ICC's information database comprehensive and up-to-date;

(c) the deployment, training and support for ICC staff;

(d) the adequacy and effectiveness of (a), (b) and (c); and

(e) areas for improvement, if any.

The Integrated Call Centre

4. The ICC is located at Kowloon Government Offices in Yau Ma Tei. It has a total of 101 agents and 12 supervisors.

5. The ICC concept involves use of both telephony and information technology. Through an Interactive Voice Recording System, incoming calls are directed to various operators on the basis of language or specialty. Operators use a computerised system to look up information in a knowledge base to provide an immediate response to callers or to send messages to the appropriate department for follow-up action. The computer system also logs calls for monitoring and statistical analysis.

6. EU envisaged that ICC would benefit all parties -- more convenience and better service to the public, operational and efficiency gains for client departments, plus increased productivity, improved management and a positive image for Government.

7. On 1 November 2001, parallel to the 60 departmental hotlines, EU introduced the 1823 Citizen's Easy Link single-number hotline, also catering for public enquiries and complaints.

8. Under Service Level Agreements between EU and client departments, ICC is expected to meet certain performance measures such as maintaining :

(a) the abandoned calls rate to less than 10 percent of the total calls;

(b) an answer rate of at least 80 percent of calls to within 12 seconds; and

(c) the first call resolution for enquiries to 90 percent (i.e. the equiries resolved at the time of first contact with a caller).

The Investigation

9. Investigation Officers of this Office met with representatives of EU, ICC and client departments. We also issued a questionnaire to survey client departments' views on the performance of ICC.

10. We visited ICC and the call centres operated by the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and the Water Supplies Department (WSD). We also took reference from the private sector call centre operated by PCCW Ltd., which provides customer service and technical support to its subsidiary.

Case Studies

11. The 16 complaint cases examined by this Office (see table in para 1) were reviewed as background material for the investigation. The nature of the complaints may be categorised as :

(a) delay in reply or lack of response (8 cases);

(b) misinterpretation of information (3 cases);

(c) misassignment of complaints (3 cases);

(d) lack of situational information in knowledge base (1 case); and

(e) call-handling capacity and contingency (1 case).

Observations and Opinions

12. ICC has brought improvement to public enquiry service. A survey conducted by ICC in November 2002 indicated that callers were, in general, "quite satisfied" with various aspects of ICC's operation and performance. Compared with the former departmental hotlines, ICC's full-time operation offers a significant improvement in convenience to callers. Access has also improved. In addition, ICC call agents are considered to have better telephone manners and interpersonal skills. Access to a computerised knowledge base enables most enquiries to be dealt with at the point of first contact, without referral to client departments. There are financial, management and efficiency gains.

13. Our investigation identified areas for further improvement with ICC operation, as mentioned below.

Maintenance of the Knowledge Base

14. The rigid format of ICC data templates has unnecessarily prolonged the updating process. This results in misassignment or misdirection of calls and increases backroom work for client departments.

Misassignment of Cases, Staff Training and Work Allocation

15. Call agents undergo a comprehensive training programme, following which they are expected to handle calls for all ICC client departments. Feedback from departments indicated that some agents were not fully familiar with departmental operations and this led to

misassignment/misdirection. Departments also noted that ICC's performance level had dropped as the number of client departments increased since mid-2002, indicative of inadequate manpower or unsatisfactory work allocation.

Call Centre Identity, Accountability and Personal Data Privacy

16. The ICC answers calls in the name of client departments. This raises concern about transparency, accountability and the caller's personal data privacy. The public may be less concerned with who deals with their calls, as long as they are handled satisfactorily. However, the fact is that members of the public are not communicating with whom they expect. Some departments felt that their reputation may be affected by proxy if ICC mishandles calls on their behalf. Six participating departments preferred ICC to identify itself outright.

One-Stop Service

17. The original intention was for ICC to provide a one-stop service for complaints and enquiries. This has been partly achieved by integrating over 60 departmental hotlines into one call centre. Government eventually intends to move to a single-number hotline for all enquiries and complaints. There is no timetable yet for such migration.

Management Culture and Working Relationship

18. ICC's organisational culture is more task- than people-oriented. Some client departments considered ICC to dominate rather than accommodate as an agent should. The relationship between ICC and client departments bears review and realignment for more cordial and cooperative partnership.

Conclusions and Recommendations

19. The Ombudsman has made the following recommendations to improve the operation of ICC in the light of Head of EU's comments :

Maintenance of the Knowledge Base

(a) Greater regard should be given to the different requirements of individual client departments. The knowledge base should be updated promptly and kept current.

(b) Consideration should be given to linking the knowledge base to Government's Geographical Information System datamap.

Misassignment of Cases to Departmental Staff

(c) Misdirection/misassignment errors should be systematically monitored and corrective measures incorporated into the knowledge base.

(d) ICC should monitor progress of enquiries/complaints and remind client departments accordingly. Messages should be forwarded promptly and reminders not issued prematurely.

(e) EU should carry out annual reviews of the knowledge base at a more global level to update departmental policies and procedures not otherwise covered in the day-to-day updating.

Staff Training and Work Allocation

(f) There should be a team responsible for interdepartmental co-ordination. Teams specialising in dealing with enquiries or complaints on particular subjects or departments should be set up. These teams will replace the back-end team to handle complex cases or calls which cannot be resolved in the first contact.

(g) Client departments should brief ICC staff from time to time to enhance their knowledge of their department operations.

Call Centre Identity

(h) ICC should answer calls in its own name. Reference to hotline numbers in departmental telephone directories should indicate that calls are handled by ICC.

(i) There should be publicity to promote awareness of the ICC and its relationship with client departments.

Accountability

(j) ICC should shed its anonymity, particularly if it is to continue to use the departmental hotlines.

(k) ICC should provide client departments with regular statistics on complaints received.

Personal Data Privacy

(l) Callers' consent should be obtained when the ICC passes their personal data to client departments or third parties.

One-Stop Service

(m) To make for a one-stop service in practice and in name, the long-term solution is to migrate to a single hotline number, say, 1823 Citizen's Easy Link.

(n) There should be a live operator to screen and forward calls to the appropriate specialist team.

Departmental Call Centres

(o) Departments should be given the option of having their own call centres or joining the ICC scheme.

Management Culture

(p) A review should be undertaken to examine and address management-staff issues.

Working Relationship

(q) EU and ICC should strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation with client departments through established channels, i.e. liaison groups and steering committee meetings.

(r) EU should determine the appropriate service role for ICC, review ICC's management culture and arrange training for management staff.

Comments from EU

20. In the course of our investigation, EU has initiated some improvement and updated the technology. It has also agreed to implement recommendations on management culture and working relationship. EU however has reservation on recommendations (f), (h) and (i). EU considers that the setting up of specialised teams will defeat the concept of one-stop service and downgrade the performance of ICC. EU also prefers to continue its practice of answering the departmental hotlines in the name of departments to prevent the callers from the confusion of being answered by an unrelated party. EU is promoting the 1823 Citizen's Easy Link in July 2003 and in so doing, will also publicise the partnership between ICC and client departments.

The Ombudsman's Final Remarks

21. The Ombudsman maintains that an open Government should be accountable and transparent to the public and the recommendations (h) and (i) aim to uphold these principles. On the issue of screening calls for forwarding to specialised teams, we believe our recommendation will minimise misdirection or misassignment of cases. The Ombudsman, therefore, considers that these recommendations should stand. This Office will continue to liaise with EU on progress with the implementation of these recommendations.

Acknowledgement

22. The Ombudsman thanks the Head, Efficiency Unit, 12 participating departments, EPD, WSD and PCCW for their co-operation and assistance throughout this investigation. She is particularly grateful for the serious attitude of EU towards this investigation.

---- End ----

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1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

1.1 The Integrated Call Centre (ICC), managed by the Efficiency Unit (EU) of the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office in the Government Secretariat, was set up to provide a one-stop service for public enquiries and complaints. The first operational phase started in July 2001 and the ICC moved into full operation in November 2002. During this period, the ICC progressively introduced new functions and took over the operation of more than 60 hotlines (60 telephone, one fax and six e-mail) formerly operated by 12 Government departments (list at **Annex 1**).

1.2 During ICC's first trial year of operation, a number of complaints were received by this Office. The Ombudsman was concerned that this might point to possible problems in the management and operation of ICC. As enquiry/complaint hotlines offer a key service to the community, any such problems should be addressed and redressed, particularly before ICC takes over more Government hotlines. The Ombudsman, therefore, notified the Head of the Efficiency Unit (Head/EU) on 4 October 2002 of her decision to conduct a direct investigation under

Section 7(1)(a)(ii) of The Ombudsman Ordinance, Cap 397. Head/EU pledged to co-operate fully in the investigation.

PURPOSE AND AMBIT

1.3 The ambit of the investigation includes examining and considering :

(a) the intended and actual operation of ICC in responding to public enquiries and complaints;

(b) the arrangements adopted by ICC for :

(i) referring to the responsible Government organisations those enquiries and/or complaints which ICC cannot respond to immediately,

(ii) monitoring responses of Government organisations to these referrals;

(iii) replying to the enquirer/complainant; and

(iv) keeping ICC's information database comprehensive and up-to-date;

(c) the deployment, training and support for ICC staff;

(d) the adequacy and effectiveness of (a), (b) and (c); and

(e) areas for improvement, if any.

THE INVESTIGATION

1.4 The ICC provided, *inter alia*, copies of its Service Level Agreements with client departments, operation manuals for its computerised database and answering system, organisation charts and job descriptions, plus statistical data on performance for scrutiny and analysis. We also obtained copies of internal and external correspondence from some client departments.

1.5 Investigation Officers of this Office met with representatives of EU, ICC and client departments. We also issued a questionnaire to survey client departments' views on the performance of ICC.

1.6 We visited ICC and the call centres operated by the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and the Water Supplies Department (WSD). We also took reference from the private sector call centre operated by PCCW Ltd., which provides customer service and technical support to its subsidiary, the internet service provider Netvigator. A list of questions arising from our interviews and visits was sent to EU for further information and clarification.

1.7 In addition, we examined 18 concluded complaint cases (Chapter 3), which this Office had received on the handling of complaints and enquiries by ICC.

1.8 Through the media, this Office invited members of the public to send in their comments on the matter during the period 4 October to 4 November 2002. No public

submission was received.

THE INVESTIGATION REPORT

1.9 A Draft Investigation Report was sent to the Head, Efficiency Unit on 2 June 2003 for comments. These were received on 12 June 2003. This Final Report was issued on 2 July 2003.

1.10 We also forwarded copies of the Draft Investigation Report to the 12 existing and former departments participating in the ICC scheme for comments. All of them have generally accepted it in so far as it relates to their own position. Factual corrections have been incorporated into the text.

2

THE INTEGRATED CALL CENTRE

HISTORY

2.1 In 1997, following public criticism of the performance of the Government telephone enquiry system, EU carried out a survey of existing services. This identified over 900 departmental hotlines and enquiry numbers - 90 percent attended by operators and 10 percent by interactive voice response systems (IVRS). It also confirmed the existence of significant problems, the most common being difficulties in access and misdirected calls.

2.2 Difficulties in access arose because the number of telephone lines or operators were insufficient to handle the volume of calls. Most operators were also available only during office hours and on a part-time basis as they had other duties. The use of IVRS was not an adequate substitute for operators because only simple and standard applications could be handled.

2.3 Misdirected calls occurred because many potential callers were confused about departmental responsibilities and did not know the appropriate channel for enquiry or complaint. Calls were, therefore, either

not received or not handled as effectively or efficiently as they should.

2.4 After research into the best practice in both the private and public sectors, EU decided to improve Government's telephone enquiry service by piloting the call center concept.

2.5 The call centre concept involves use of both telephony and information technology to support trained call-handling operators. Looking up information stored in a computerised database, the operators either provide an immediate response to the enquiry or, where necessary, obtain further information from the appropriate client organisation before responding. Typically, a call centre is accessed through a single hotline number served by multiple operators.

2.6 EU set up two separate pilot call centres, in WSD and Labour Department, in the autumn of 1999. When reviewed in February 2000, the centres were generally found to have met or even exceeded their performance targets in such areas as :

(a) the rate of successful call connection - indicating a sufficiency of telephone lines to handle the number of calls being answered and queuing to be answered;

(b) the rate of caller abandoned calls - the percentage of incoming calls abandoned by the caller while waiting for an operator (or IVRS) to answer; and

(c) the average call answering time - either the average number of seconds the caller has to wait for an operator (or IVRS) to answer or the percentage of calls answered within "x" seconds.

These favourably compared with the telephone service and IVRS previously operated by the departments (**Annex 2**). Complaints about the Labour Department's telephone enquiry service also dropped by 94 percent.

2.7 After successful testing of the call centre concept in single departments, and following visits to call centres in Australia and USA, EU moved to develop and implement an ICC. This would cut across traditional departmental boundaries and enable calls for a group of issues spanning several departments to be handled by a common call facility.

2.8 Based on a feasibility study, the field chosen for ICC was environmental hazards and cleanliness, because :

(a) there was genuine public concern about those issues;

(b) there was a significant number of calls for enquiry and complaint; and

(c) most importantly, the issues cut across large parts of the business of ten departments and had some impact on another six.

The original proposal was for ICC to cover the activities of 16 departments and 150+ processes, or individual subject matters. After further discussions with some departments,

it was ultimately agreed that the initial phase would involve 12 departments.

ANTICIPATED AND ACTUAL BENEFITS

2.9 EU envisaged that implementation of ICC would benefit all parties :

(a) **for the public** - convenient single-number access to a wide range of departments, a real person to talk to (unlike IVRS) and fast access to consistent and correct answers without the need to understand Government's organisational structure or distribution of responsibilities;

(b) **for participating departments** - guaranteed service levels, real-time management information, streamlined procedures, relief from managing telephone operation and reduction in duplication of work, particularly for problems which cut across organisational boundaries;

(c) **for the Administration** - improved productivity, effective management of resources, a positive image for Government services, infrastructure for new applications and statistical information for service monitoring and resource planning. An ICC would also be more cost-effective than building several departmental call centres and be capable of dealing more efficiently

with issues across departments.

2.10 EU also anticipated that implementing an ICC would result in efficiency gains for participating departments in :

(a) **front-end functions** - call-handling would be transferred directly to ICC;

(b) **back office functions** - activities supporting call-handling could be streamlined or transferred to ICC; and

(c) **site functions** - activities relating to following up on calls could be better co-ordinated and streamlined.

2.11 Significant intangible benefits were also expected both to the public and to Government, including :

(a) resolution of most requests at first point of contact;

(b) handling multiple requests in one call;

(c) improved call-handling standards and performance;

(d) reduction of failed and misdirected calls;

(e) improved referral of problems to the appropriate department(s);

(f) more effective handling of problems by the

departments concerned;

(g) full process tracking of the resolution of problems; and

(h) potential application to other areas of Government activity.

2.12 The one-off cost of the ICC was estimated to be $92 million (ie capital expenditure plus upfront business process re-engineering). The annual operating cost was expected to increase from $46.2 million in 2001/02 to $71.9 million by 2003/04, remaining the same thereafter. EU calculated that ICC would enable departments to give up the equivalent of 160 personnel (90 front-end and 70 back office), with total realizable savings increasing from $16.4 million in 2001/02 to $76.2 million in 2007/08. The estimated and actual income and expenditure and the resulting surplus/deficit for the seven years from 2001/02 to 2007/08 is set out in Table 1 below :

Table 1

Financial year	01/02		02/03		03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08
(Figure in million)	Expected	Actual	Expected	Actual					
Income	16.4	11.8	29.6	21.4	36.2	49.6	56.2	62.9	76.2
Expenditure	46.2	13.2	69.3	22.3	71.9	71.9	71.9	71.9	71.9
Surplus/(Deficit)	(29.8)	(1.4)	(39.7)	(0.9)	(35.7)	(22.3)	(15.7)	(9.0)	4.3

The broad aim was for savings from front-end call-handling to exceed operating expenditure from 2007/08 onwards. In practice, the net financial position has been better than expected with ICC operating costs being kept far lower than estimated whereas departmental cost savings are only slightly lower. The reduced ICC expenditure is primarily the result of increased efficiency and lower than estimated salary costs.

OPERATION

2.13 Funding for ICC was approved in April 2000, following which EU invited tenders for a two-year project to set up and develop a computerised telephone answering and knowledge base system. A contract of $49 million was awarded to Cable & Wireless HKT CSL Ltd in October 2000. A further $6 million was spent on renovation and the remaining $37 million was the cost of staff utilised on project development met through temporary internal redeployment. Following recruitment and training of management and frontline staff, ICC took over departmental hotlines in four batches :

(a) July 2001 - Environmental Protection, Transport, Food and Environmental Hygiene;

(b) November 2001 - Buildings, Electrical and Mechanical Services, Highways;

(c) February 2002 - Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation, Civil Engineering, Hongkong Post, Leisure and Cultural Services, Marine, Rating and Valuation; and

(d) April 2003 - Architectural Services.

2.14 EPD was subsequently asked by EU to withdraw from the project in October 2002 because EPD was unwilling to offer more than $0.5 million savings per annum, which EU considered to be well below the cost that EPD was incurring on running its own call centre. EPD argued that ICC was unable to meet its service requirements but EU maintained that any unmet service requirements could be addressed

through implementation of improvement initiatives.

2.15 During its first 16 months of operation, ICC was being developed with support from EU and PCCW staff. This phase ended on 31 October 2002, marking the end of development and the commencement of full operation.

2.16 On first transfer of a service from a department, ICC operates by answering that department's diverted hotlines. As from 1 November 2001, ICC also established its own **1823 Citizen's Easy Link** hotline that avoids the necessity of the public obtaining an individual department's hotline number. Publicity has been designed that will establish this as the "brand name" for ICC. Departments are given the choice of continuing to publish their own number; switching to 1823 alone; or continuing to publish both. When answering a departmental hotline number, ICC operators answer in that department's name. When answering 1823, ICC operators answer in the name of 1823 Citizen's Easy Link.

2.17 Organisationally, ICC is a unit of EU run mostly by non-civil service contract staff. The ICC establishment (133) consists of a Chief Executive Officer, one Executive Manager, supported by a management team of four Call Centre Managers, four Assistant Call Centre Managers and two Quality Assurance/Training Officers. In addition, there are 12 Call Centre Supervisors and a total of 101 frontline Call Centre Agents. In addition, there are four Technical Support Officers and four Administrative Assistants. An organisation chart is at **Annex 3**. The entry requirements and duties of ICC staff are at **Annex 4**.

2.18 ICC is located in Kowloon Government Offices in

Yau Ma Tei. It comprises a 77-seat call centre and 15 training seats. Although used mainly in an off-line mode for staff training, the training seats can also be used to handle calls from the public at times of exceptional demand.

2.19 Each seat is connected via a computer terminal and telephone headset to the computerised PABX and Customer Relations Management System that are the technical heart of ICC. There are three key elements to ICC's technical support systems : Call Management, Knowledge Base and Case Management.

Call Management

(a) When a departmental IVRS number is called, the customer is offered a choice of automated or operator service. The ICC's IVRS handles the former and for the latter the call is routed to an ICC agent, who answers in the name of the department;

(b) When a departmental telephone hotline is called, the ICC's IVRS offers the caller a choice of language and then routes the call to an ICC agent, who answers in the name of the department;

(c) When the 1823 Citizen's Easy Link number is called, the ICC's IVRS offers the caller a choice of language and then routes the call to an ICC agent, who answers in the name of 1823 Citizen's Easy Link.

(d) The system can be programmed to divert

incoming calls to different designated agents on the basis of the number called and language requested. The PABX will check which agent with the necessary skill set is available and relay the call to him/her. If all the agents are engaged, the call is queued. When an incoming call is routed to an agent's terminal by the system, it prompts the agent to answer in the appropriate name.

(e) A computerised Call Management System monitors the call and work flow and displays statistics on queue length and waiting time on a wall monitor and on computer terminals, allowing managers and supervisors to intercept or redirect calls dynamically. The Call Management System also collects statistics for performance monitoring and reporting.

Knowledge Base

2.20 Having picked up a call, the agent then listens to the caller, asking questions to help identify the nature of the complaint or enquiry. The agent picks out keywords from the caller which are entered into the system via the terminal; the system searches the knowledge base and responds by showing the relevant subject information screen. This contains explanations on the subject, guidance to the agent on how to relay information to the caller or what further questions to ask, also a list of on-line documents available for viewing. The agent is not expected to memorise the contents of the knowledge base, but to know how to understand and communicate the relevant information

from the system. If the agent cannot provide the caller with an immediate answer, the call is first referred to a centralised back-end section for resolution. If, despite this, a call involves an enquiry which ICC is unable to answer, ICC e-mails a summary to the relevant departmental officer.

2.21 The knowledge base is updated as necessary. Each participating departments has one or more terminals on which to monitor and ensure that the contents are kept current. Supervisors monitor agents' performance daily and ICC reviews unresolved cases weekly. ICC may request additional material if inadequacies are detected in the information currently available. Alternatively, departments may initiate changes. All additions and deletions must be submitted in specified templates provided by ICC. Agents and supervisors receive daily briefing notes outlining changes made. Urgent updates can be displayed as a ticker on agents' computer monitors.

<u>Case Management</u>

2.22 The system checks and reconciles the number of messages sent to departments and the replies received, to ensure that cases are not "lost". It also prompts departments for an acknowledgement and an interim or final reply after a specified number of days. Departments are required to submit replies according to templates provided by ICC. Once a reply is received, the agent either relays the contents to the caller by telephone or forwards the department's e-mail or fax. All replies are given in accordance with the name given during the original enquiry.

2.23 New agents receive four to five weeks' training

to operate the system and the knowledge base. Role-play assessment in the final week leads to graduation or more training. Upon graduation, one month of supervised operation follows. Agents start by handling calls directed to only one or two department's numbers. As agents become more experienced, they undergo additional training and assume responsibility for answering calls for a greater range of departments. The training package for newly-recruited ICC operation staff is at **Annex 5.** Supervisors monitor 1-2 percent of calls on an ongoing basis, to identify agents who require further coaching or training.

TARGETED AND ACTUAL PERFORMANCE

2.24 The Service Level Agreement signed between EU on behalf of ICC and each participating department specifies the responsibilities of either party for handling complaints and enquiries. The performance specifications vary among departments, but typically state that :

(a) the abandoned calls rate should be less than 10 percent of the total calls;

(b) the call answer rate should be at least 80 percent of calls answered within 12 seconds;

(c) the first call resolution for enquiries should be 90 percent (ie enquiries resolved at the time of the first contact with a caller);

(d) ICC should log enquiries and complaints into the Case Management System immediately for

telephone calls and retrieve messages from voicemail within three hours and call back callers;

(e) for "simple enquiries" (ie first call resolution), ICC should provide an immediate answer for telephone calls and handle e-mail and fax within 24 hours;

(f) for "unresolved enquiries", if ICC cannot locate the necessary information through other sources, ICC should assign the case to the responsible department within 24 hours. The department should reply according to their performance pledges. ICC should reply to the caller within 24 hours after receiving the reply from the department;

(g) for complaints, ICC should e-mail or fax the department immediately and the department should acknowledge receipt according to the performance pledge;

(h) ICC should reply to the caller and close the case within 24 hours of receiving the final reply from the department;

(i) if the time taken for a department to respond to a message from ICC exceeds the period allowed in the Service Level Agreement by 24 hours, ICC will "escalate" the case by sending an e-mail or fax to the departmental subject officer's supervisor informing him of the delay. The purpose is to ensure that

overdue cases will be followed up; and

(j) ICC should convert new or updated information for the knowledge base into the required format within three days. After receiving departmental confirmation of the contents, ICC should upload the information into the system within two to three days. In urgent cases, information should be uploaded within one day of receiving it from the department. (See table at **Annex 6**)

2.25 Achievement of targets depends on effective co-operation between ICC and client departments. Communication is maintained through four channels :

(a) calling the duty officer direct;

(b) contact between the designated departmental liaison officer and the ICC core management team member responsible for that particular department;

(c) liaison group meetings, at regular intervals, between staff of a single department and ICC management; and

(d) overall Steering Committee meetings on need basis between all participating departments and ICC management.

3

CASE STUDIES

GENERAL

3.1 Since it began operation in July 2001 up until May 2003, the ICC has dealt with over 1.8 million calls, e-mails or faxes from the public. During the same period, ICC has received 143 complaints and 72 compliments. This Office has also received 30 complaints about its handling of enquiries and complaints by departmental hotlines. To date, 18 cases have been concluded. Of these, 16 are reported in this chapter; the other two have inconclusive findings due to withdrawal. The cases outlined here have provided additional information on ICC operation to supplement our interviews and site visits.

3.2 We have summarised the 16 cases into different categories according to the nature of complaint.

Delay in Reply or Lack of Response (Case 1 to 8)

3.3 These cases illustrate delay or lack of response, by ICC and/or participating departments where ICC had failed to effectively follow up or monitor the progress of complaints. The benchmark for expected performance is to

provide the complainant with either a substantive or an interim reply within the period specified in the Service Level Agreement.

3.4 These 8 cases were reported to this Office prior to ICC implementing of additional functions in August 2002 that monitor the progress of unresolved cases and generate reminders to client departments automatically. Since then, this Office has received no further complaints about delay concerning ICC's departmental hotlines.

Case 1

3.5 The complainant called Transport Department (TD) hotline to complain about a bus route not following its timetable but did not receive any response.

3.6 Our inquiry revealed that ICC had referred the complaint to TD for investigation. TD passed the findings to ICC for forwarding to the complainant. However, ICC could not contact the complainant immediately and then did not make further attempts at contact. When this Office began inquiries, TD contacted the complainant and discovered that ICC had not forwarded its reply. TD then took remedial action by replying to the complainant directly, 1 1/2 months after the conclusion of its investigation.

Case 2

3.7 The complainant called TD hotline twice to lodge two separate complaints. He complained to this Office that TD did not reply to his first complaint and had delayed two months in replying to his second.

3.8 Our inquiry revealed that ICC did reply promptly to the first complaint but failed to follow up the second case with TD or inform the complainant about progress within 21 days.

3.9 The complainant subsequently learned from our investigation of another complaint case (also from him) that it was ICC, and not TD, which had handled his complaint. He then queried whether it was legal for ICC to refer his personal data to TD without obtaining his consent. Advice from our independent legal adviser indicated that there had been no breach of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance but that this practice might constitute maladministration if the complainant had not been informed beforehand.

3.10 This case also shows that members of the public are not aware of the operation and role of ICC in handling complaints. The lack of transparency can create problems, certainly concern, over personal data privacy.

Case 3

3.11 The complainant called TD hotline to complain about noise from traffic lights. When he did not receive any reply within 21 days as promised, he called again to complain about the delay. A response was finally given after 1 1/2 months.

3.12 Our inquiry revealed that ICC had referred the first complaint to TD but did not follow up the case until the complainant called again about the delay.

Case 4

3.13 The complainant called TD hotline to complain about bus services but did not receive any response until three months later, despite several follow-up calls.

3.14 Our inquiry revealed that ICC had referred the complaint to TD but failed to inform the complainant. ICC also failed to follow up with TD, even though the complainant subsequently called several times.

Case 5

3.15 The complainant called TD hotline to complain about the inappropriate location of a railing opening. After half a year, the situation had still not improved. He then approached this Office to complain about the delay.

3.16 Our inquiry revealed that ICC had referred the complaint to TD but failed to follow up or inform the complainant about progress within 21 days. For its part, TD had noted the complainant's recommendation but could not make immediate alteration to the railing. TD failed to give ICC an interim reply to inform the complainant of this. When the alteration work was later carried out, TD gave ICC a substantive reply but ICC failed to convey this promptly to the complainant.

Case 6

3.17 The complainant called TD hotline to complain about the cancellation of two private bus routes but did not receive a response until four weeks later.

3.18 Our inquiry revealed that the ICC agent was unable to answer the complainant immediately because there was no updated information on the subject in the ICC knowledge base. ICC thus referred the complaint to TD, which gave a reply 3 weeks after receipt of the referral. However, ICC did not relay TD's reply to the complainant and a week's delay ensued. TD had not updated information for the ICC knowledge base because they had been fully occupied with other matters. ICC could not give a prompt reply to the complainant because of heavy workload.

Case 7

3.19 The complainant e-mailed Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) address to enquire whether there was any proposal to build a park next to his home but did not receive a reply until two months later.

3.20 Our inquiry revealed that ICC had referred the case to LCSD but failed to inform the complainant about progress within 21days or follow up with LCSD. LCSD did not provide ICC with any interim reply for the complainant and took time to prepare a substantive reply because it had to obtain information from other departments.

Case 8

3.21 The complainant called TD hotline to suggest alteration of free parking near his residence. He first received obsolete information and then received a substantive reply only after seven months.

3.22 Our inquiry revealed that ICC had referred the request to TD, which considered the matter and then passed

its response to ICC for forwarding to the complainant. ICC failed to contact the complainant. TD later changed its decision without informing ICC. When ICC finally contacted the complainant after three weeks, they passed on the outdated information. Dissatisfied, the complainant called the hotline again. ICC then referred the case to TD again. Without giving any interim reply, TD finally replied to the complainant direct, seven months after the original enquiry.

Misinterpretation of Information (Case 9 to 11)

3.23 The following cases illustrate failure by ICC to give complete or correct advice to the complainant due to the call agent misinterpreting departmental information in the knowledge base.

Case 9

3.24 The complainant called Highways Department (HyD) hotline to complain about a defective street lamp. The ICC agent replied that it would be repaired within 24 hours but it actually took two days.

3.25 Our inquiry revealed that the ICC agent had not elaborated to the complainant that, according to HyD's priority system, only emergency cases would be resolved within 24 hours while other defective equipment would be repaired within three days.

Case 10

3.26 The complainant called EPD hotline to complain about noise from decoration work upstairs. After being told

that no action could be taken, he complained to this Office about the poor manners of the ICC agent.

3.27 Our inquiry revealed that the ICC agent had told the complainant that no enforcement action could be taken since the work did not breach the Noise Control Ordinance. Accordingly, no site visit would be arranged. This response was correct although ICC agent had misinterpreted the nature of the complaint as applying to construction works, not domestic decoration.

3.28 ICC apologised to the complainant for the manner of the agent.

Case 11

3.29 The complainant called TD hotline to complain about illegal parking at a roundabout in a cul-de-sac. After being informed that nothing could be done to improve the situation, he complained to this Office about TD's negligence in handling his complaint.

3.30 Our inquiry revealed that ICC had referred the complaint to TD, which provided a reply to the complainant via ICC with an explanation. TD's explanation contained a typographical error that was inconsistent with the reply. As a consequence, ICC staff replied that it was impractical to zone the roundabout as a restricted area, but gave no further explanation or details of TD's policy considerations. The ICC agent failed again to explain the details of TD's policy when the complainant called the hotline a second time.

Misassignment of Complaints (Case 12 to 14)

3.31 The following cases illustrate failure by ICC to refer complaints to the appropriate department.

Case 12

3.32 The complainant called Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) hotline to complain about water seepage at his residence. The ICC agent told him to contact WSD. When he called WSD, he was told to call FEHD but he declined to do so. WSD then conducted a site inspection and referred the case to FEHD for further action. The complainant complained to this Office about the ambiguous and inconsistent information given to him by the two departments.

3.33 Our inquiry revealed that the advice given by the ICC agent was incorrect - the established procedures for handling water seepage would be to refer complaints to FEHD in the first instance. WSD and FEHD had both acted correctly. (Note: WSD's hotline is not manned by ICC.)

Case 13

3.34 Arrested for littering, the complainant was dissatisfied with the attitude of the enforcement officer. She called EPD hotline to complain, in the belief that EPD was the responsible department.

3.35 Our inquiry revealed that the ICC agent clarified with the complainant that the department concerned should be FEHD, not EPD and advised the complainant to call the FEHD hotline number.

3.36 This case illustrates a procedural error in referral: it deviates from the concept of ICC being a one-stop service for complaints. Since FEHD is also a client department of ICC, the agent should have immediately recorded the complaint for internal referral, instead of asking the complainant to make a separate call.

Case 14

3.37 The complainant called the Continuing Education Fund Scheme hotline about the qualifications for application. He received misleading information from ICC staff and wasted time in making an application for which he was not qualified.

3.38 Our inquiry revealed that ICC staff had given general and not specific information to the complainant. This misled him to believe that he was qualified.

Lack of Situational Information in Knowledge Base

Case 15

3.39 The complainant called the FEHD Shatin Office to complain about illegal hawker activities several times within 12 months. Each time, he received no response. He then called ICC FEHD hotline for progress and was told that his complaint "will be put on record". Consequently, he complained to this Office about FEHD's inaction.

3.40 Our inquiry revealed that FEHD had actually taken action against illegal hawkers in response to each of the complainant's calls to its Shatin Office but had not informed him of the action taken. When the complainant

called ICC FEHD hotline, ICC did not know of the previous complaints or FEHD's action. The ICC agent simply gave the standard response before referring the complaint to FEHD.

3.41 This case illustrates a shortcoming in the ICC knowledge base. Unlike the departments linked to Government's Geographical Information System datamap, ICC does not have on-line access to background information about locations subject to complaints (e.g. incidence of previous complaints or actions already taken). Moreover, even though departments may include such information in the draft replies they provide to ICC for complainants, ICC has no mechanism for filing this for future reference.

Call-Handling Capacity and Contingency

Case 16

3.42 The complainant called the Continuing Education Fund Scheme hotline many times but his calls were never answered.

3.43 Our inquiry revealed that ICC was responsible for answering calls to the hotline on an *ad hoc* basis at the time. EU explained that this was an isolated case because the volume of calls exceeded that for which the department had requested support.

3.44 This case illustrates ICC's inability to handle unexpectedly large increase in call volume.

OBSERVATIONS

3.45 In sum, these 16 cases are indicative of some problems with ICC, namely :

- Delay in reply or lack of response;
- Misinterpretation of information;
- Misassignment of complaints;
- Lack of situational information in knowledge base; and
- Call-handling capacity and contingency.

4

OBSERVATIONS AND OPINIONS

GENERAL

4.1 The introduction of ICC has resulted in improvement to Government call-handling, but as with any new system there are areas that can be improved in its present and future operation.

4.2 From our observation and discussion with staff of both ICC and client departments, we note that ICC generally operates smoothly and seamlessly as an extension of the client departments. Public satisfaction with ICC's performance is evidenced not only by a Customer Satisfaction Survey in November 2002 but also by the small number of complaints to this Office compared to a total of 1.8 million calls, or on average some 90,000 calls per month, handled by ICC since it began operation.

4.3 This survey was carried out on a statistically accurate random sample of 579 calls made to ICC (out of the total of 69,293 calls). It showed that interviewees were,

in general, "quite satisfied" with various aspects of ICC's operation and performance. On a scale ranging from 1 ("very dissatisfied"), 2 ("quite dissatisfied"), 3 ("average"), 4 ("quite satisfied") to 5 ("very satisfied"), the average scores received were as follows:

➢ Waiting time	3.5
➢ Adequacy of the answer received	4.0
➢ Manner of the call agents	4.2
➢ Sufficiency of the call agents' knowledge	3.9
➢ Ability of the call agents to understand the callers' needs	4.0
➢ Clarity and comprehensibility of the call agents' explanation	4.0
➢ Satisfaction with ICC's service	4.1

To monitor customer satisfaction on an ongoing basis, ICC plans to install an IVRS customer satisfaction survey system in July 2003.

4.4 The comparatively low rating for waiting time (para. 4.3) may be attributable to the inadequate number of call agents, resulting in ICC's inability to answer calls within the target specified in the Service Level Agreement (ie 80% of calls answered within 12 seconds). Some departments have remarked that ICC's performance on this score had declined in the second half of 2002. Detailed performance indicators for the period between April 2002 to May 2003 at **Annex 7** shows that the score rebounded since December 2002.

4.5 ICC combines two conceptual elements:

(a) call centre organisation and technology; and

(b) cross-departmental integration.

BENEFITS OF CALL CENTRE ORGANISATION AND TECHNOLOGY

4.6 A benefit of ICC compared with the former departmentally-operated hotlines is the availability of complaint and enquiry services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Another benefit is the guarantee that calls will be put through to ICC. These provide a higher level of convenience to callers than the former office-hours only, limited-line services.

4.7 Five departments acknowledge that ICC staff are more "professional": being trained call agents, they have better telephone manners and interpersonal skills when dealing with members of the public. Given the large volume of calls handled by ICC, an answering "voice" which is pleasant, helpful and efficient can enhance public satisfaction as well as their perception of departments and Government as a caring Administration. This is a substantial intangible benefit.

4.8 The knowledge base enables agents to quickly provide consistent, accurate and standardised answers, as well as informative statistics. When the range of questions asked is wide and subject to periodic change, this technology has definite advantages over reliance on an operator's memory. It is faster and more accurate than looking up facts and figures filed in a paper database. The

overall effect is increased speed and greater front-end capacity to handle enquiries and complaints.

4.9 ICC contract staff can provide service more economically than hotlines previously operated by departments.

4.10 The system's "paperless" technology enables ICC to communicate quickly and efficiently with departments by e-mail or computer fax. There is no need to retype messages and send them by post or through a separate fax machine.

4.11 Having a computerised system to keep track of all calls facilitates production of up-to-date and regular analyses and statistics to be produced. Departments thus have access to detailed information on the nature and number of complaints and enquiries being received, as well as the performance of ICC in processing the calls.

BENEFITS OF CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL INTEGRATION

4.12 A common problem with the former discrete departmental hotlines is that callers may be successively referred from one department or officer to another when trying to find the right place to make a complaint or enquiry. This leaves them frustrated and feeling that Government departments are incompetent, irresponsible, obfuscatory or bureaucratic.

4.13 ICC on the other hand feeds the hotlines of all its client departments into a central answering system. A caller does not have to dial the "right" hotline number to receive service. This saves callers' time, avoids

frustration and enhances their impression of departmental responsiveness and Government efficiency.

4.14 Another advantage of integration is the pooling of staff resources. The number of calls to individual departmental hotlines fluctuates so that operators may at times be overloaded or underused. Grouping a number of departmental hotlines together enables the workload to be evened out. Additional staff and system capacity can also be made available to deal with increases in any individual department's call volume due to seasonal or one-off events.

4.15 Integration and increased staff resources also mean improved access. A caller is less likely to receive a busy signal because of inadequate telephone lines or to have to wait a long time for connection because the operator is busy. As a result, there are fewer abandoned calls (ie callers' hanging up because they are tired of waiting for an agent to answer).

4.16 Compared with each department having its own call centre, ICC maximises the use of resources. Equipment, management and support services can be shared. Accommodation can be more efficiently utilised if a large number of agents are housed under one roof.

IDENTIFIED AREAS OF CONCERN ABOUT ICC OPERATION

4.17 The operation of ICC comprises technological process and human components which should work together in complementary fashion. Every organisation is expected to have "teething problems" during development and ICC has to resolve them. However, there is still more to be done.

This is not only to improve the existing ICC operation but also to ensure that any similar problems are addressed in any new or expanded ICC.

4.18 Areas of concern identified are as follows:

- maintenance of the knowledge base (paras. 4.19 - 4.25);
- misassignment of cases to departmental staff (paras. 4.26 - 4.37)
- staff training and work allocation(paras. 4.38 - 4.47);
- call centre identity(paras. 4.48 - 4.51);
- accountability (paras. 4.52 - 4.56);
- personal data privacy (paras. 4.57 - 4.59);
- one-stop service (paras. 4.60 - 4.62);
- departmental call centres (paras. 4.63 - 4.64);
- management culture (paras. 4.65 - 4.70) and;
- working relationship (paras. 4.71 - 4.76).

Each area is discussed below.

Maintenance of the Knowledge Base

4.19 The procedures for inputting and updating information in the knowledge base are the sources of considerable aggravation to client departments. Several departments have complained about the rigid format of ICC's data templates. Changes in design can be made only at the generic level for all departments and take "a long time".

4.20 ICC explained that during development stage and

to ensure consistency of approach, departments were asked to use data templates for inputting and updating information in the knowledge base. As the system matured, departments were allowed to use free formats for updating. Standard formats have not been used for more than six months.

4.21 The knowledge base is updated as follows :

- ICC agents request additional information from departments, on a matter receiving enquiries or the matter is receiving prominent media coverage.
- Departments initiate the update based on changes in their information or procedures.
- The uploading of information normally takes two days following departmental confirmation.

The timeframe for the updating of knowledge base is at table 2.

Table 2

	ICC action	Department action
Updating initiated by ICC	➢ ICC will forward the information in the required format within 3 days ➢ ICC will upload the information into the knowledge base within 2 days	➢ Department will confirm whether the information is correct
Updating initiated by department	➢ ICC will upload the information before the event takes effect ➢ For urgent cases, ICC will upload the information immediately onto the knowledge base	➢ Department should forward the information at least one day before the events takes effect

4.22 While eight client departments feel that ICC agents either lack experience or are insufficiently trained, seven suggest that ICC does not have sufficient manpower. This may be the cause of reported delays in updating the knowledge base and referring cases to departments.

4.23 The effort involved in inputting data into the knowledge base is justified only if a subject is "popular" and frequent enquiries are anticipated. While theoretically able to accommodate all kinds of information, the system is in practice better suited to respond to enquiries of a general nature involving material which is relatively stable over time (eg procedures). It is less able to cope with calls which are case-specific and subject to rapid or frequent change (eg what is being done at a particular location).

4.24 ICC intends to undertake annual review of each department's knowledge base, reviewing both the accuracy and sufficiency of the information and the ease with which it provides support to ICC agents. These reviews will involve both ICC agents and client departments. Changes will be tested and staff training given as necessary.

4.25 Two departments have complained that even when they provide replies to ICC on a particular case, the knowledge base has no way to "remember" the details because the system can search its records only according to a caller's telephone number or file reference, and not by the location, incident or subject of previous calls. Some departments feel that the situation could be improved by linking the knowledge base to the Geographical Information System datamap into which they already input situational and case-specific information for their own use. If ICC

could use this information to respond to callers, many enquiries or complaints need not to be referred to client departments.

Misassignment of Cases to Departmental Staff

4.26 An ICC agent will assign a case to the relevant department where a call relates to an enquiry that cannot be answered without reference to a department or concerns a complaint against the department. For many cases, the assignment is to a particular officer among several hundreds within a department. In order to assign the case to the right officer, ICC relies on guidelines from the department on the basis on which the assignment should take place. A particular concern of some departments is the degree to which cases may be misassigned and the procedures for reassignment.

4.27 Nine departments have reported enquiries and complaints either misdirected to their departments or misassigned to the wrong departmental officer. Four said that ICC agents had failed to provide essential information to enable them to follow up on cases. The feeling is that agents do not have sufficient understanding of how Government works in general, what their departments do in particular or the functional/geographical responsibilities of the individual departmental officers to whom they refer cases.

4.28 Departments are also frustrated by the process for redirecting misassigned messages to their correct destination. Unless procedures dictated by ICC are followed, departments and officers continue to receive reminders from ICC to take action on cases they have already

redirected elsewhere. These problems will be exacerbated when ICC expands to serve additional client departments.

4.29 In order to assess the situation, ICC has analysed the assignment and reassignment of cases for one department for the month of May 2003. The results are as follows:

- Of 1390 cases assigned to the department, all were correctly assigned to the department but 150 (11%) required reassignment to another officer within the department.
- Of these 150, the majority (101) needed to be inspected by the department in order to determine the correct assignee.
- Of the remainder, 19 concerned subjects not covered by the guidelines; 17 were misassigned due to ICC agent error; and 13 were reassigned on request from the department, for example because of the officer being posted.

ICC will coach the staff and update guidelines as far as possible to avoid misassignment. However, ICC highlights the fact that the problem of getting a case to the right officer is no longer falling on members of the public.

4.30 Departments have also complained that ICC does not seem to learn from mistakes and the same errors (or type of errors) are repeated. This may be because each mistake is treated on an individual basis (eg by correcting the call agent making the mistake) and not by systematic cure of the cause (ie by correcting the way use of the knowledge base has led to the mistake).

4.31 Three departments have remarked that, when ICC

receives emergency calls from members of the public, they should be responsible for referring the cases to the Police, instead of requiring the callers to do so. EU advises that this subject has been discussed between departments and the Police at ICC Steering Committee meeting. Tests were also conducted to redirect calls from ICC to the Police 999 Emergency Centre. The results of the tests were not entirely satisfactory and the Police expressed concern that callers might hang up in the course of redirection, resulting in delayed response. Given that ICC is not intended as an emergency hotline, it was agreed that callers should be asked to dial 999 in emergency cases involving actual or possible injury or death. If the callers insisted on not calling 999, ICC would record details of the case as far as possible and call 999 immediately.

4.32 To improve its monitoring of cases (para. 3.4), ICC has installed software to automatically track cases and issue reminders to departmental subject officers. Departments complain that the software is sending them premature reminders. This is because the software starts counting from the moment ICC receives the call, ignoring the time taken by ICC to forward the message to the department.

4.33 A further issue with misassignment is the impact on officers to whom a case is reassigned. ICC's Case Management System automatically tracks assigned cases and issues reminders. Reassignment eats into the time targeted for responding to the public and officers complain that they are being reminded before they have had sufficient time to deal with a case. ICC has agreed with departments the following measures to address this, all of which will have been implemented by July 2003:

(a) Subject officers should request reassignment, when necessary, within 5 days of referral.

(b) ICC manager will liaise with departments concerned if a case is reassigned more than two times.

(c) If a case is assigned to a subject officer so that there is not enough time for him to deal with the case, ICC will make an interim reply to the caller and extend the deadline for reply by the subject officer for 7 days.

(d) All initial reminders and escalation reminders will be counted from the date the case is referred to the subject officer.

4.34 Nine departments feel that too many simple and common enquiries, which should be capable of being answered by the knowledge base or from the agents' own memory, are slipping through for referral to them.

4.35 The Service Level Agreements target first time resolution of calls at 90%. In the 14 months from April 2002 to May 2003 the monthly results have only fallen below that target four times, and only once below 89%, when the figure was 86%. ICC is piloting an arrangement whereby enquiries unresolved at the first call are passed to a back-end team to resolve them without recourse to the department.

4.36 While departments acknowledge that ICC has reduced their front-end load, eight also report an increase in back-office work as a result of misdirected or

misassigned cases and calls which should have been handled by ICC without referral to them. Two have also reported an increase in communication with ICC and other departments from having to deal with such cases.

4.37 The ICC system can search its Case Management database by caller number or file reference but not according to case content. Nor can the system log calls according to their geographical location. Some departments have suggested that if the system were able to do so, then ICC agents would be able to identify repeat notification of an event and avoid reporting them again to the department. ICC is unwilling to make this change (if it were able to do so) because of the risk that events might be misidentified as being the same leading to under-reporting and failure to respond.

Staffing Training and Work Allocation

4.38 Apart from contents of the knowledge base, it is important to consider the way staff can best use it. This involves both system design (including human-machine interface) and staff training. Eight departments have attributed the problems described above to insufficient manpower in ICC, ignorance of Government operation, insufficient training or supervision of agents. It may also be inherent in the way ICC expects its agents to operate.

4.39 Call agents recruited by ICC are required to have had at least one year's experience in customer service. They receive two months of supervised operation, including training, before being required to handle calls on their own. The training consists of:

	Days	Weight
System training (including basic PC, phone log in, use of knowledge base & Call Management System, etc)	6	26%
Customer service training	6	26%
Training on department knowledge and information	6	26%
Field practice and assessment	5	22%

Initial training and work experience focus on the work of one or two departments. Only after successful completion of this phase will agents be required to work on more departments. This level of training is far superior to that offered in the private sector, which was a factor in ICC being awarded Gold Prize in the category of Call Centre (over 50 staff) in the 3rd Annual Call Centre Awards 2002.

4.40 A fundamental purpose of the training is to ensure that ICC agents are able to access, understand and interpret the information in the knowledge base. It is important that agents do not seek to rely on their own memory when answering enquiries as that could lead to giving out wrong information. Nonetheless, over a short period of time agents become adept at finding information and familiar with its nature. This enables them to interpret the information for enquirers, not just read it out parrot fashion.

4.41 New agents are expected to answer calls for only one department. As they gain experience, they assume responsibility for a greater number of departments. This sacrifices depth for breadth and may be counter-productive. The requirement to serve a wide range of departments precludes familiarity with any particular one. Agents thus have difficulty focusing on which department does what,

increasing the risk of misassignment of calls. It also decreases the frequency with which an agent encounters and recognises the same enquiry or common complaint, which would otherwise improve the ability to retrieve the correct answer or recognise an incorrect one.

4.42 This practice of using call agents as "generalists" is in direct contrast with private sector call centres and departmental call centres. It is significant that while a private sector centre may have many customers, its agents are organised into specialist teams, each serving only one particular client. Despite being driven by cost considerations and profit motive, the private sector appreciates that simplicity of call agents' work (by segregation into smaller functional units) should override other considerations and would make for higher efficiency.

4.43 Six departments have observed that ICC has no designated team to handle cases which are complicated or concern more than one department and that client departments had to resolve outstanding issues among themselves without the benefit of co-ordination by ICC.

4.44 ICC has informed this Office that for complicated or cross-departmental cases, it has not been uncommon for ICC to co-ordinate responses particularly for grey areas where no department has been willing to take responsibility. ICC say they are also piloting the use of their back-end team to provide centralised case management for cases involving a number of departmental subject officers.

4.45 The departmental call centres of WSD and Labour Department demonstrate what staff can achieve, even with less sophisticated technology, if they concentrate on a

relatively narrow span of subjects. In comparison, the broad span of ICC agents denies them a proper understanding of their many departments. This makes for difficulties in answering common and frequently-asked questions, as well as in assigning and directing referrals.

4.46 Departments associated with ICC since the first phase of its operation note that performance was better and problems were fewer, when ICC had only a small number of client departments. Service deteriorated when more departments were added and manpower problems started to surface. Such weaknesses will be aggravated by any expansion of ICC's scope of activities and recruitment of additional departments into the scheme. Public satisfaction survey and performance statistics show that the situation improved through learning process of ICC about the need to deploy staff flexibly as work loads fluctuate.

4.47 The nature of ICC's work is both complex and repetitive. This may pose a problem to recruit and retain agents with the ability to master the system. We do not consider that this problem can be totally solved by improved training, benefits or working conditions. In our view, redesigning the scope of work may also enable the staff to cope more comfortably and perform more effectively. This should help maintain higher staff stability and in time build up their understanding of Government and client departments.

Call Centre Identity

4.48 Five departments have stated that there has been insufficient publicity to promote awareness of ICC taking over departmental hotlines and several others have implied

as much. Analysis of the individual cases in Chapter 3 also shows that most callers are unaware of ICC's existence because ICC answers in the name of departments concerned. EU has said that taking on the client's identity follows the "common and best practice … in both the private and public sectors in Hong Kong and elsewhere". ICC management has also expressed the view that callers would be confused if they dialed a departmental hotline but someone else answered on its behalf.

4.49 Given the choice, six departments would prefer ICC to respond to their departmental hotlines in ICC's own name (or in a collective capacity, as with the 1823 Citizen's Easy Link). The five departments that favour calls being answered in the department's name want mainly to perpetuate their identity and profile among the public and to be seen as organisationally responsive.

4.50 This Office considers that preserving individual departmental identity while having calls answered in ICC's own name can be compatible objectives. Departmental letterhead, publicity material and entries in the Government telephone directory can simply indicate that calls will be handled by ICC. Callers would then be made aware and not be confused by the response. This could overcome the problems of transparency and data privacy. In any case, callers' concern is not so much who answers but how their enquiry or complaint is resolved satisfactorily.

4.51 ICC has informed this Office that to date publicity for "1823 Citizen's Easy Link" has been low-key in order to ensure that there would be no major surge in demand for which they may not be fully prepared. As of July 2003, publicity for the number will be fully launched including televised

"Announcements of Public Interest". ICC hopes that this will encourage departments to wind down the publicity of their separate hotlines. However, this Office considers that any publicity would be premature and possibly counter-productive until it is decided who is to be named as answering the calls.

Accountability

4.52 This Office is concerned as to whether ICC's current practice leads to blurring of accountability.

4.53 ICC has maintained that client departments and ICC are all part of one and the same Government; that ICC is answering calls as the departments' agent; and that contracting-out arrangements are well established. With Government's other agency arrangements such as cleansing or the management of car parks and housing estates, however, it is usually clear what agent is actually doing the work. This is not the case when call centres such as ICC answer in their client's name. This Office suggests that calls with enquiry or complaint are often the community's first contact with Government. The issue here is that ICC is seen by some to be "hiding" behind the client department when it is important as a matter of principle for Government to be and be seen as open, transparent and accountable.

4.54 Departments justifiably feel that their image and reputation would be tarnished by proxy if ICC does not perform well and callers mistake the agents to be departmental officers.

4.55 EU says that public complaints against the attitude of ICC staff are thoroughly investigated by ICC

management, including examination of the relevant tapes of telephone conversations. If a complaint is substantiated, management takes appropriate action such as staff coaching or warning. When ICC has reason to apologise for the actions of its staff, it does so in the name of the relevant department.

4.56 Departments are concerned over having to take the blame when they have no control over how ICC agents handle calls. They are even unaware of the extent of the problem since ICC presently does not disclose complaint statistics to them. In the absence of adequate information and control measures, the departments lack the opportunity or authority to "manage" their agent effectively. ICC is thus not accountable either to the public or to its client departments.

Personal Data Privacy

4.57 A further concern about ICC answering calls in the client departments' name is that of personal data privacy. Callers imagine that they are giving their particulars to the department but are actually being recorded by ICC. Then, unknown to and unauthorised by the caller, the information is passed to the client department - a "third party".

4.58 The arguments that ICC and client departments being part of "one and the same Government" and ICC acting as an agent for departments can be applied here to make out a case that the transfer and sharing of callers' data are both valid and legal. EU points out that 90% of callers identify themselves only with a surname and telephone number, insufficient to constitute personal data. With regard to

the other 10% of callers, the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data (PCO) has advised that since ICC and its client departments are both defined as data users, there would be no breach of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance provided the personal information collected is used only in dealing with their enquiry or complaint.

4.59 Personal data privacy could become a source of greater public concern in future if more departments become ICC clients and more sensitive information such as household income, welfare status or health records have to be divulged in processing an enquiry or complaint. Although it may be legal for ICC to hold and transfer such data, this does not necessarily make it socially acceptable and complaints about abuse may still arise. This is another reason for ICC to be transparent in identifying itself and seeking callers' agreement if personal data has to be shared with third parties. ICC agrees with this even though it may not be a requirement of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance.

One-Stop Service

4.60 As noted in Chapter 1, Government's original aim was to provide callers with a one-stop service. This implies that all Government complaints and enquiries would be accessed through a single hotline number. ICC does not achieve this objective, since it covers only 12 of the 60 departments in Government and, even now, there are over 60 hotline numbers.

4.61 While we believe that a one-number service would be more convenient for callers, EU considers that any sudden switch to a single Government hotline number would cause confusion. EU has, therefore, introduced the 1823

Citizen's Easy Link to operate in parallel with ICC departmental hotlines. EU's intention is gradually to replace the individual departmental numbers by 1823 once the latter becomes better known through increased publicity. However, there is no announced plan or timing for this. Meanwhile, we believe the existence of parallel schemes may add to callers' confusion.

4.62 We have referred to the desirability of ICC having specialist teams for individual departments or different functional areas (paras. 4.41 - 4.43). This is operationally compatible with a single-number call centre by employing switchboard operators to receive all incoming calls and redirect them to the appropriate specialist teams. It is not considered advisable to use interactive voice recording system (IVRS) to redirect calls since this would be time-consuming for callers and presupposes they know which specialist team is to deal with their problem.

Departmental Call Centres

4.63 Departmental call centres employing contract staff can enjoy the same benefits of technology, organisation and cost-saving as ICC, while avoiding problems associated with physical integration. Compared with ICC, departmental call centres also have several advantages :

(a) centres can be designed to meet the needs of a particular department, instead of being generic;

(b) any problems with staffing or facilities will not affect the call-handling performance of

other departments;

(c) information can be accessed and communicated over a common departmental computer system without having to ensure compatibility with the system;

(d) a narrower span of knowledge will improve agents' understanding of their department, thereby reducing misassigned cases and information errors; and

(e) improved transparency, accountability and personal data privacy.

In addition, telephone technology allows departmental centres to be integrated "virtually" with other departmental call centres so that misdirected calls can be transferred.

4.64 Having regard to the nature, complexity, volume and staffing demands of their calls, the needs of some departments might be better served by having their own call centre.

Management Culture

4.65 Although it is a part of Government, ICC is staffed mostly by non-civil service contract staff; adopts a number of private sector practices; and has its own organisational culture. However, ICC training emphasises the need for agents to act as part of Government and to develop a familiarity with its role. ICC's monthly turnover is 1.2% for agents and 0.3% for supervisors (all non-civil service

contract staff). This is well below call centre industry average, and reflects mainly the initial weeding out of recruits during training.

4.66 During our visits to ICC, we observed that while management was generally upbeat in talking about the operation of ICC, agents and supervisors were reticent. We subsequently received a letter from a staff member which provides a possible explanation. EU and ICC management were represented as being oppressive, intolerant of dissent and applying pressure to achieve overly ambitious performance targets. We are unable to ascertain the validity and representativeness of these statements. However, we can certainly sense a degree of uneasiness among some members of staff.

4.67 Our impression from our visits was that the management culture is more task- than people-oriented. For example, the working environment, although clean, comfortable and modern and of good ergonomic design, is less personalised and more functional compared to WSD and EPD call centres. ICC told us that this reflects the difference between centres operating only one shift, where agents can be assigned permanent positions, and a centre operating multiple shifts, where agents will be assigned a different position form time to time. To provide dedicated positions for a multiple shift system would require at least a 50% increase on positions, significantly increasing both capital and running costs.

4.68 This Office believes that when the economy and employment position improves, ICC may have difficulties in staff retention due to its more functional working environment.

4.69 These concerns point to a need to review ICC's internal working relationship.

4.70 Key aspects of ICC's management culture are communications, attitude and business/interpersonal relationship with client departments.

Working Relationship

4.71 The official relationship is theoretically a co-operative "working partnership" of "equal partners" or ICC seen as a "contractor, but not subordinate". This means that decisions should be agreed by mutual consent but the feeling among departments is that EU tries to dominate, not accommodate. Departments report feeling "pressured" to join ICC and being given "hard sell" by EU on the benefits of surrendering their own hotlines. This Office detects that departments believe EU and ICC to see themselves as the dominant partner, or even master, "doing a favour" for departments.

4.72 Draft versions of the Service Level Agreement impose heavy responsibilities on departments but few obligations on ICC. Perhaps because there was no actual cash "payment" for services, the drafts do not reflect the same type of relationship which exists between private sector call centres and their clients. More balanced terms had to be negotiated by departments. It should be particularly noted that departments had to surrender resources to ICC. Some departments still feel that ICC should be assuming more responsibilities and requiring less support from them (eg in the preparation of materials for the knowledge base).

4.73 Two departments have expressed some difficulty in contacting the ICC Duty Manager on the telephone number given, but ICC has refused to provide any additional or mobile telephone numbers. EU explains that the Duty Manager is a very busy person. Departments have been told to contact their respective ICC liaison officers if they cannot contact the Duty Manager. If the liaison officer cannot be contacted or located, calls will escalate to the Executive Manager. This approach appears to ignore the basic problem that if departments were able to get satisfaction from their respective liaison officers, they would not need, or wish, to contact the Duty Manager. It rather confirms the feeling of departments that they are not being adequately served, and that EU and ICC are not addressing departments' concerns to improve the situation.

4.74 On attitude, three departments comment on ICC management being unwilling (or unable) to work with them to solve problems. This may be attributable to what one department has called ICC's "blaming mentality" - a tendency to criticise the client department rather than acknowledge its own faults when mistakes are made.

4.75 At the interpersonal level, the relationship between client departments and ICC has been variously described as "friendly, good and cordial" through "not friendly, but neutral" to "heated" and even "bad, sometimes hostile". Liaison officers tend to get along better with their opposite numbers at the working level than departmental and EU/ICC management at the steering committee level. Better working relationship might be possible if ICC organised its staff into specialist teams which departments regularly met and briefed.

4.76 In all, the relationship between ICC and client departments bears review and realignment for more cordial and cooperative partnership in the service of our community.

5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

5.1 We believe in one-stop service for client convenience and Government efficiency. We support the concept of an integrated call centre coupled with telephony and information technology. We appreciate EU's initiative in planning a number of measures to improve the ICC systems for better performance. However, other areas of concern discussed in this Report have also to be addressed. Our recommendations aim to offer redress thereof.

CONCLUSIONS

5.2 As a result of our investigation, we have come to the following conclusions:

(a) ICC has demonstrated the workability of the integrated call centre concept. Some operational problems need to be overcome for

more effective service, particularly if its scope of work or coverage of departments is to be expanded;

(b) ICC has been generally successful in improving the performance of client departments in responding to telephone enquiries and complaints;

(c) Improvement in performance is due mainly to the use of telephony and round-the-clock operation, compared to manual systems and part-time previously used by client departments. While integrating the hotline service of different client departments under one roof has had logistical and financial benefits, it has also caused some operational problems such as misdirection and misassignment of cases;

(d) ICC's knowledge base lacks the flexibility to adapt to the different needs of individual client departments. It also lacks situational awareness about what other enquiries or complaints have been made regarding the same subject or location, what action has been taken in response to past calls and what is the present position;

(e) The duration of ICC staff training (long, compared with private sector call centres) is indicative of both the thoroughness of induction and the complexity of the work. However, unrealistic expectations are placed

on telephony, information technology and call agents. The agents are expected to be generalists able to take on all enquiries and complaints about any client department. The organisation of call-handling, allocation of staff and use of the knowledge base could be improved for better service delivery;

(f) Most members of the public are more concerned with how their enquiries and complaints are dealt with and whether they get satisfactory answers rather than who is at the other end of the line;

(g) ICC not identifying itself to callers creates confusion and results in a lack of transparency in its operation contrary to the principle of public accountability and could cause problems with callers sensitive about personal data privacy;

(h) The objective of a one-stop service for public enquiries and complaints has been achieved for client departments. However, a Government-wide single-number service has yet to be achieved and the future direction of integrated call-handling is unclear. Some departments may be better served by having their individual call centre. Meanwhile, with ICC run on the current format, the co-existence of the 1823 Citizen's Easy Link is a source of potential confusion to the public; and

(i) ICC has problems with staff management and in its relationship with some client departments. Some of them perceive an unwillingness in ICC to acknowledge problems and to solve them co-operatively. This may be attributable to the organisational and management culture of EU and ICC (paras. 4.65-4.76).

RECOMMENDATIONS

5.3 We consider the current operational and management problems of ICC capable of remedy. To this end and in the light of Head, Efficiency Unit's comments (para. 6.2). The Ombudsman makes the following recommendations for Government's consideration:

Maintenance of the Knowledge Base

(a) To facilitate the inclusion and updating of the knowledge base, greater regard should be given to the different requirements of individual client departments. Updating should be prompt and the knowledge base should be kept current (paras. 4.19 - 4.21);

(b) To enhance situational awareness and "memory" of the system, consideration should be given to linking the knowledge base to the Geographical Information System datamap (paras. 4.22 - 4.25);

Misassignment of Cases to Departmental Staff

(c) To minimise misdirection or misassignment of cases and other common errors, systematic monitoring should be introduced and corrective measures incorporated into the knowledge base (para. 4.27);

(d) To ensure cases are followed up properly, ICC should promptly forward to client departments, monitor progress and remind them in time, but not prematurely (para. 4.32);

(e) To improve operational effectiveness and efficiency, EU's annual review of the knowledge base should also examine procedural and staffing approaches to technological problems, not just focus on upgrading the technology (para. 4.37);

Staff Training and Work Allocation

(f) To better understand and serve clients, call agents and supervisors should be reconstituted into specialist teams, each responsible for a particular department or functional area (ie group of related departments). There should also be a designated team for handling and co-ordinating cases which are complicated or cut across the services of more than one department (paras. 4.41 & 4.43);

(g) To improve staff performance, work should be redesigned ergonomically to recognise their limitations. The aim should be to tailor the system to take into account the limitations of, and provide support to, the staff. Client departments should brief ICC staff from time to time to enhance their knowledge of Government and departmental operations (para. 4.47);

Call Centre Identity

(h) In the interest of transparency and accountability, ICC should answer calls in its own name. Departmental letterhead, publicity material and entries in the Government telephone directory should indicate that calls are handled by ICC on agency basis. However, such publicity should not be undertaken until a decision is reached on whether and how departmental hotlines should be identified (para 4.50-4.51);

Accountability

(i) To ensure clarity and accountability to callers, ICC should shed anonymity, particularly if it is to continue to use the departmental hotlines (para. 4.50);

(j) To improve accountability to client departments, ICC should regularly provide them with statistics on the number of

complaints received about its service (para. 4.56);

Personal Data Privacy

(k) To remove public concern over breach of personal data privacy, ICC should identify itself to callers and obtain their consent before passing personal data to client departments or third parties for further action(para. 4.59);

One-Stop Service

(l) To make for a one-stop service in practice and in name, the long-term solution is to migrate to a single hotline number, say, 1823 Citizen's Easy Link (para. 4.61);

(m) To minimise misdirection or misassignment arising from calls to a single hotline, there should be operators for initial screening of calls for forwarding to the appropriate specialist team (para. 4.62);

Departmental Call Centres

(n) EU together with the Steering Committee (para. 2.25(d)) should regularly review and as appropriate revise call-handling needs of departments (with the assistance of outside consultants, as necessary);

(o) The possibility should not be ruled out that

some departments might be better served by departmental call centres (para. 4.64);

Management Culture

(p) To improve internal working relationship, management-staff issues should be reviewed (paras. 4.65 - 4.70);

Working Relationship

(q) To improve working relationship with client departments, the liaison groups (para. 2.25(c)) should strengthen their dialogue for better mutual understanding and co-operation;

(r) EU should in conjunction with client departments (and outside consultants as necessary) determine ICC's service role, review ICC's management culture and arrange appropriate training for management staff (paras. 4.71 - 4.76).

5.4 The "Integrated Call Centre" concept is working and can work better still. ICC has taken steps in the right direction and has made efforts to improve along the way. However, given the rising expectations of our community and the complexity of Government services, ICC has to improve further to satisfy the needs of callers and client departments fully.

6

FINAL REMARKS

COMMENTS FROM EU

6.1 We are sincerely grateful to the Head, Efficiency Unit for his timely comprehensive comments on our Draft Investigation Report. He has also taken the opportunity to update this Office on ICC's improvement initiatives since declaration of this investigation. We have carefully considered his comments and:

(a) as far as practicable, we have incorporated factual corrections and recent updates into the text; and

(b) whereas his viewpoints differ from ours, we have extracted them in **Annex 8** and

In the following paragraphs, we go over his response to our recommendations in general.

6.2 EU's response to our recommendation is quoted below (captions are added by this Office):

Maintenance of the Knowledge Base

(a) We have already implemented measures to keep the knowledge base updated promptly and current.

(b) We can give consideration to this but worry that we would never be sure that complaints received for the same location were in fact the same complaint and this could lead to mishandling of complaints.

Misassignment of Cases to Departmental Staff

(c) We are already implementing measures to analyse the cause of and minimise misdirection or misassignment of cases.

(d) We implemented a system to monitor progress of complaints in August 2002 and will implement further measures to minimise premature escalations in July 2003.

(e) Not absolutely clear what this recommendation is about.*

Staff Training and Work Allocation

(f) This recommendation as it stands would severely downgrade customer service and the operational performance of the ICC. It would undoubtedly lead to complaints. The

* This Office reckons that EU has covered this recommendation vide (a).

main problems are:

- The effective introduction of a "switchboard operator" defeats the key objective of a "one-stop" service;
- Longer waiting times if pressure builds up for one particular area whereas at present calls will automatically be spread;
- Problems for those customers not knowing which department to call. This would require a "switchboard operator" to sort out. This would duplicate the call agents' work with no obvious benefit;
- Delays and problems associated with switching from one specialised team to another if a complaint has been wrongly assigned; and
- Agents unable to deal with more than one enquiry or complaint from the same caller but for different areas without switching. This is not an uncommon occurrence.

I cannot stress enough that the fundamental premise on which the ICC was approved and developed was for the caller to make one choice for language, and then be answered by an agent with no switching (to eliminate telephone "ping-pong" as it was commonly referred to).

(g) The ICC is providing a round-the-clock service unlike the one shift service you

refer to. It would be very expensive and inefficient to assign every agent with a permanent position of his/her own.

Call Centre Identity

(h) ICC is answering calls in the name of 1823 Citizen's Easy Link for 1823 calls. We do not agree with the recommendation to answer calls from departmental hotlines in the name of 1823. We have already explained that our practice is accepted best practice being adopted in both the private and public sector, eg the call centres of Housing Department and e-Certificate of Hongkong Post. There are numerous such examples in the private sector. Adopting your recommendation would lead to considerable confusion with people calling one number and being answered in the name of another. PCO has advised that the existing complaint handling arrangements, including the transfer of personal data to the departments concerned, do not beach the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance. We have so far only received one complaint out of 1.8 million calls handled which raised concern about the transfer of personal data.

Accountability

(i) ICC will promote 1823 Citizen's Easy Link more widely from July 2003 onwards.

(j) ICC has already provided the complaints and

compliments statistics on a monthly basis to departments since April 2003.

Personal Data Privacy

(k) Same as (h).

One-Stop Service

(l) There is currently no confusion (as evidenced by minimal number of complaints), because of the seamless operation between 1823 and departmental hotlines. Gradually over time more and more departments will seek to change from our answering in the name of the departmental hotline to 1823 Citizen's Easy Link but we have no intention of forcing this decision and will leave it up to them.

(m) Same as (f).

Departmental Call Centres

(n) & (o) Throughout the process of developing ICC, we have always reviewed call-handling needs jointly with individual departments and no departments have been forced to join the ICC. The same practice will continue.

Management Culture

(p) We have an on-going drive to improve the

internal working relationships with staff.

Working Relationship

(q) & (r) We have already implemented measures to step up the communication with departments and to ensure mutual understanding.

FINAL REMARKS FROM THE OMBUDSMAN

6.3 This Office appropriates EU in effect accepting most of our recommendations and already taking on board some of them in the course of our investigation. The only issues remaining are the setting up of specialist teams and disclosing ICC's identity in answering calls to departmental hotlines.

6.4 On the former issue, we note that ICC back-end team as present deals with unresolved enquiries prior to referrals to departments. The concept of a specialist team is essentially a refinement of the back-end team operation, in effect a second tier for call-handling. Enquiries referred to departments normally take a couple of days for reply and it is our aim that with a specialist team, ICC may minimise the need for referral. This should reduce the waiting time for reply. It will also prevent misdirection or misassignment of cases to departments if calls to a single hotline are screened by experienced agents. In sum, we consider that the benefits to be derived from a specialist team offset the cost cited by EU.

6.5 As regards ICC's identity, this Office has reservations on EU's argument :

(a) Government must uphold transparency in all transactions with the community. Callers to departmental hotlines have a legitimate expectation to raise their enquiries or problems with departmental "experts". ICC has an obligation to inform them that they are agents for, and not members of, the departments;

(b) The present practice of answering in the name of departments as is contradictory to the concept of ICC as a one-stop service;

(c) Some participating departments prefer calls to be answered in the name of ICC. This is understandable because it may facilitate the callers to follow up their cases with the correct organisation;

(d) As discussed in the previous chapters, some callers do not wish their personal data to be supplied to an organization other than the department concerned. If ICC were to identify itself, callers have the choice of continuing the call or quitting;

(e) EU states that ICC will widely promote 1823 Citizen's Easy Link from July 2003 onwards. We remain of the view that any such publicity would be premature and possibly counter-productive. It should be mounted when it is

decided who is to be named as answering the calls.

(f) As for EU's point that agents answer enquiries in the name of their principals in the private sector, we maintain that while reference should be taken from private sector best practice, ICC is to do with Government services and the community expects clearer accountability from the public service;

(g) We believe that the 30 and 143 complaints received by this Office and ICC respectively do not reflect the true volume of complaints about ICC operations. We do not have the complaint numbers made to departments nor do we know how many complainants, actual or potential, lodged or intended to lodge their complaints against departments in ignorance of ICC's role in the operation of departmental hotlines.

6.6 We respect EU's different points of views. However, we maintain that our recommendations are in the interest of the operation of the ICC and hence the interest of the community. The Ombudsman therefore considers that these recommendations should stand. This Office will continue to liaise with the EU on progress with the implementation of these recommendations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

6.7 The Ombudsman thanks the Head, Efficiency Unit, 12 participating departments, WSD and PCCW for their co-operation and assistance throughout this investigation. She is particularly grateful for the serious attitude of EU towards this investigation.

---- End ----

Office of The Ombudsman
Ref. OMB/WP/14/1 S.F. 103
July 2003

Departmental hotlines taken up by ICC

	Department	Issues related to	Hotline/Fax No. or Email Address
1.	Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department	Animal Management Centre	2362 3257
2.		Animal Management Centre / HK	2551 8586
3.		Animal Management Centre / Kln	2362 4147
4.		Animal Management Centre / NT N	2670 2201
5.		Animal Management Centre / NT S	2691 2191
6.		Complaint	2150 6651
7.		Country Park Education Unit	2422 9431
8.		Endangered Species Protection Division	2150 6999
9.		General Enquiry	2150 6666
10.		General Hotline (IVRS)	2708 8885
11.		Import Control Section	2150 7070
12.		Marine Parks Management	2957 8757
13.		Wetland & Fauna Conservation Division	2150 6990
14.	Architectural Services Department	General Enquiry	2867 3628
15.	Buildings Department	Building Safety	2626 1234
16.		Building Safety Loan Scheme	2626 1579
17.		Existing Building / HK	2626 1642
18.		Existing Building / Kln	2626 1257
19.		Existing Building / NT	2626 1270
20.		Fire Safety	2135 2416
21.		General Enquiry	2626 1616
22.		IVRS	2626 1313
23.		Licensing	2626 1085
24.		New Building / HK	2626 1382
25.		New Building / Kln	2626 1551
26.		New Building / NT	2626 1482
27.		PADS & Rail	2626 1566
28.		Site Monitoring	2626 1700
29.		Slope Safety	2135 2525
30.	Civil Engineering Department	Slope Safety (A)	2885 5888
31.		Slope Safety (B)	2762 5165
32.	Electrical and Mechanical Services Department	Hotline	2882 8011
33.	Environmental Protection Department	Beach Water Quality	2511 6666
34.		Smoky Vehicle Emission	2827 0858
35.		Pollution TEG	2755 7000
36.		Pollution TNG	2685 1122
37.		Pollution TSG	2838 3111
38.		Pollution TWG	2411 9600
39.		Pollution UEG	2402 5251
40.		Pollution UWG	2417 6550
41.		Waste Recycling	2755 2750

Environmental Protection Department withdrew from the ICC in October 2002.

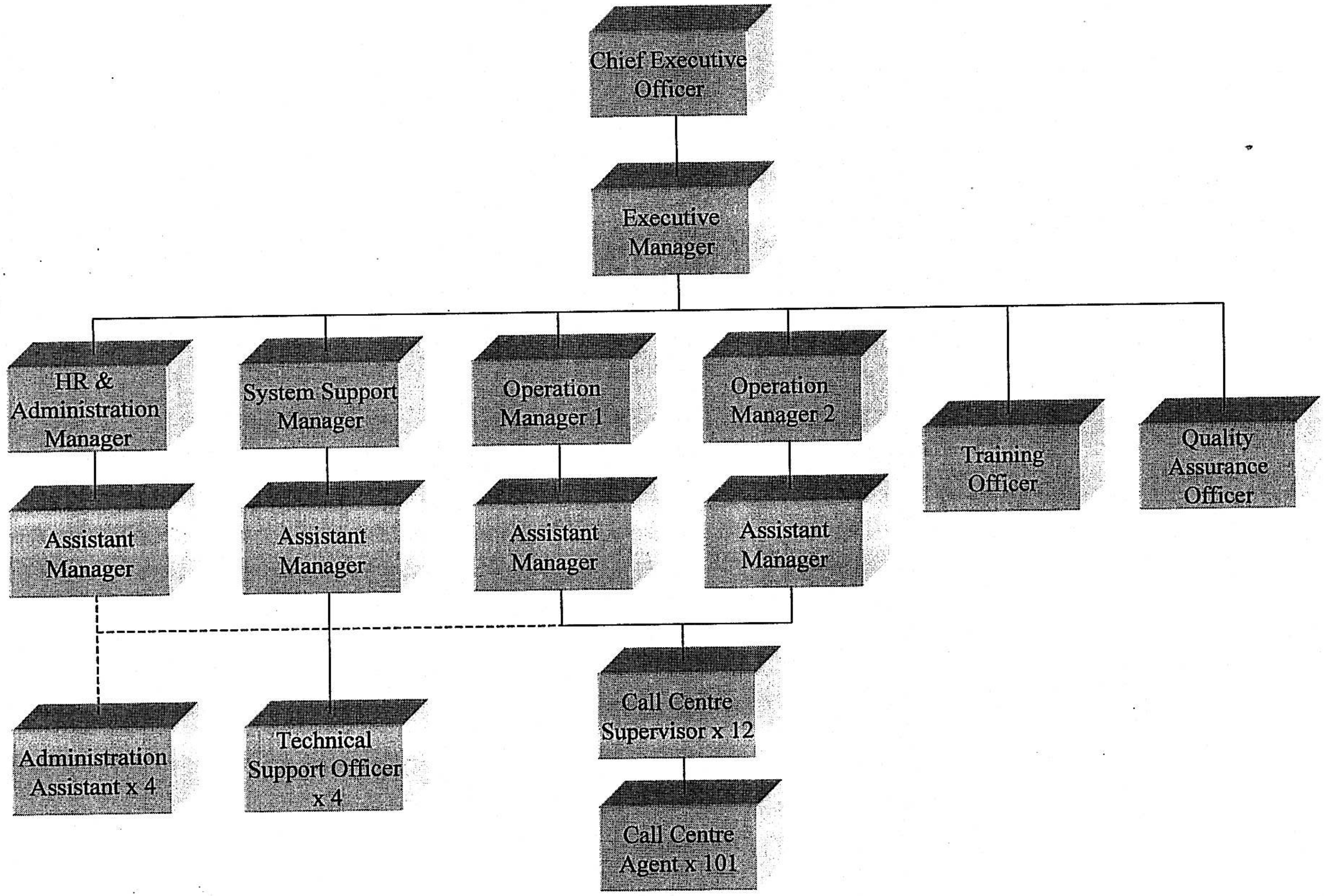
	Department	Issues related to	Hotline/Fax No. or Email Address
42.	Food and Environmental Hygiene Department	General Enquiry and Complaint	2868 0000
43.		Complaint	2923 5050
44.		E-mail (General Enquiry and Complaint)	enquiries@fehd.gov.hk
45.		E-mail (Clean Hong Kong Issues)	cleanhongkong@fehd.gov.hk
46.	Highways Department	Complaint	2714 1111
47.		Headquarters	2926 4111
48.		HK Region	2923 7777
49.		Kln Region	2927 4444
50.		NT Region	2926 4222
51.		Lighting 1	2388 9765
52.		Lighting 2	8102 6686
53.		Tsing Ma Control	2495 1155
54.		E-mail (Enquiry)	enquiry@hyd.gov.hk
55.		E-mail (Complaint)	complaint@hyd.gov.hk
56.	Leisure and Cultural Services Department	Customer Service	2414 5555
57.		General Hotline (IVRS)	2603 4567
58.		E-mail	enquiries@lcsd.gov.hk
59.	Marine Department	Enquiry	2815 0100
60.		General (IVRS)	2542 3711
61.	Hongkong Post	General (IVRS)	2921 2222
62.	Rating and Valuation Department	General Enquiry	2152 0111
63.		Tenancy	2150 8228
64.	Transport Department	General (IVRS)	2804 2600
65.		Tsuen Kwan O (suspended since Apr 03)	1878 218
66.		Fax	2804 2652
67.		E-mail	tdenq@td.gov.hk

Performance of Water Supplies Department (WSD) and Labour Department (LD) call centres

		Performance	
		prior to setup of call centre	February 2000
Success rate of connection to IVRS	WSD LD	97% 93%	100% 99%
Success rate of connection to the operators	WSD LD	76% 31%	96% 84%
Average waiting time for connection to operators (in seconds)	WSD LD	54 112	23 19
Average processing time for calls handled by operators (in minutes)	WSD LD	4 3.5	3.1 2.5

Annex 3 (para. 2.17)

Organisation Chart of ICC



Entry requirements and duties of ICC staff

Position	Entry requirements	Job Description
Executive Manager	1. a HK degree, or equivalent; 2. 7 years' relevant post qualification working experience of which at least 3 years in call center management; & 3. good communication and interpersonal skills.	1. Manage ICC; 2. Manage Service Level Agreement and coordinate with participating departments for continuous improvement; 3. lead the process implementation with departments; & 4. supervise the management team to maximise performance.
Manager, Support (A)	1. a HK degree, or equivalent; 2. 5 years' post qualification working experience, preferably in call centre or customer service; 3. good command of written and spoken English and Chinese/Cantonese; & 4. computer knowledge.	1. work with departments on development of new process and migration of departmental processes to ICC; 2. identify issues and initiate improvements for operation effectiveness; & 3. identify and initiate call centre system enhancement to meet new operation requirements.
Manager, Support (B)	-Ditto-	1. develop and implement long term training and development plan for ICC staff; 2. staff management; 3. develop and implement effective quality assurance plan; and 4. co-ordinate office administrative matters.
Manager, Operation	1. a HK degree, or equivalent; 2. 5 years' post qualification working experience; & 3. knowledge of IT and telephone system operation.	1. Manage the call handling operation; 2. plan, control and manage ICC's resources to meet standard; 3. handle complaint against ICC; & 4. produce reports on ICC performance.
Assistant Manager	1. a HK degree, or equivalent; 2. grade E or above in Chinese and English language in HKCEE, or equivalent; 3. 3 years working experience of which at least 1 year in call centre operation; & 4. computer knowledge.	1. assist respective managers for their own responsibilities.

Positions	Entry requirements	Job Descriptions
Quality Assurance Officer	1. a HK degree, or equivalent; 2. 2 years' relevant post qualification experience in customer service and/or training field; & 3. good command of written and spoken English and Chinese/Cantonese.	1. implement the quality assurance plan; 2. conduct calibration and review meetings with supervisors in quality matters; 3. perform real time monitoring; & 4. work with supervisors and training officer to organise training courses.
Training Officer	-Ditto-	1. implement the training and development plan; 2. coordinate and provide training; & 3. work with quality assurance officer in identifying training needs.
Technician	1. Diploma or higher certificate in electrical, electronic engineering or computer science; 2. grade E or above in Chinese and English language in HKCEE, or equivalent; & 3. 3 years' post qualification experience in call centre equipment maintenance.	1. assist in administering, operating, inspecting, maintaining and repairing electrical, IT and telephone equipment;
Supervisor	1. grade E or above in 5 subjects, including Chinese and English language in HKCEE, or equivalent; 2. relevant customer service/call center working experience of which at least one year at supervisory level; 3. fluent English and Cantonese, fluent Putonghua an advantage; & 4. computer knowledge, good Chinese and English typing skill an advantage.	1. lead and coach a team of agents; 2. monitor real time traffic; 3. handle complaints against ICC staff and operation; & 4. review and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of agents.
Agent	1. grade E or above in 5 subjects, including Chinese and English language in HKCEE, or equivalent; 2. one year working experience; 3. fluent English and Cantonese, fluent Putonghua an advantage; & 4. computer knowledge, good Chinese and English typing skill an advantage.	1. handle calls and other contacts; & 2. take follow-up actions.
Administrative assistant	1. grade E or above in 5 subjects, including Chinese and English language in HKCEE, or equivalent; 2. one year working experience; & 3. computer knowledge.	1. provide clerical support.

Annex 5 (para. 2.23)

Training Package for ICC Operation Staff

New Hire Programme - Training for New Recruits

Item	Content	Duration	Proportion
1	Orientation	1 day	4.3%
2	Soft Skill Training - Team Building - Effective Communication - Customer Services Skill - Quality Assurance	5 days	21.7%
3	System Training - Front-end system training - The use of telephony & standard script	6 days	26.1%
4	Knowledge Base Training - Training on knowledge of two major departments - Directory enquiry	6 days	26.1%
5	Practice and Assessment - Field practice and call attachment - Skill Assessment	5 days	21.7%
Total		23 days	100%

Other Training Programme

Training	Duration	Remarks
Training on knowledge of department not covered in the New Hire Programme	15 days in total spread across 2 to 3 months	For new recruits
Soft Skill Training - Customer service focus group - How to handle difficult customer - Performing through EQ	0.5 to 1 day	On a need basis
Refresher Training - Selected topics on departmental knowledge	2 days	On a need basis
System new features training - Training on use of new features	0.5 – 1 day	On a need basis

Responsibilities of ICC and client departments

Responsibilities	ICC	Departments
Service	➢ 80% of call answered within 12 seconds ➢ Call abandon rate less than 10% ➢ 90% of rate of first time resolution for enquiry ➢ 90% of e-mails from public and department should be handled within 24 hours ➢ 90% of voicemail should be handled within 3 hours	--
Updating of knowledge base	➢ To convert the information into knowledge base format within x days ➢ To upload information into knowledge base within x day after confirmation by department	➢ To forward the information x days before it takes effect
Case handling	➢ Complaint through telephone be referred to department immediately after the call ➢ 90% of complaints through email/fax/web/letter should be referred to department within 24 hours	--
	➢ To issue escalation if officer fails to acknowledge the case	➢ To acknowledge receipt of complaint
	➢ To issue interim reply reminder at a certain date agreed	➢ To provide interim reply, if appropriate
	➢ To issue escalation if final reply is not received within y day of case referral	➢ To provide final reply to ICC within x days of case referral

Key Performance Indicators (from April 2002 to March 2003)

Indicator	Apr-02	May-02	Jun-02	Jul-02	Aug-02	Sep-02	Oct-02	Nov-02	Dec-02	Jan-03	Feb-03	Mar-03	Apr-03	May-03
TSF (Target - 80%)	78%	60%	46%	52%	39%	33%	24%	42%	71.1%	78.1%	82.0%	85.8%	69.3%	81.8%
Average Time to Answer (in seconds)	12	44	33	35	66	85	102	60	19	12	9	7	17	9
Abandoned Rate (Target - 10%)	3.0%	10.4%	10.0%	9.0%	16.2%	17.8%	20.0%	14.0%	5.0%	3.0%	2.0%	1.5%	4.0%	2.0%
Average Call Handling Time (in seconds)	279	325	232	210	206	226	228	343	305	291	286	288	301	312
First Time Resolution Rate (Target - 90%)	91%	91%	92%	92%	92.5%	90.0%	89.0%	86.0%	90%	89%	89%	90%	90%	90%

Note :

TSF - Telephone Service Factor Percentage of incoming calls should be answered within 12 seconds

Average Time to Answer Average time for the caller to wait when queuing for operator connection

Abandoned Rate Percentage of total calls abandoned when queuing for operator connection

Average Call Handling Time Average duration of time that a call handled by operator

First Time Resolution Rate Percentage of enquiries can be resoluted at the first contact

Comments from EU

Paragraph	Issues	Comments
3.4	Case studies (Cases 1–8)	All these cases were reported to the Office of The Ombudsman prior to the implementation by ICC in August 2002 of additional functions that monitor the progress of unresolved cases and generate reminders to send to client departments automatically. Since then, no further complaints about delay concerning ICC's departmental hotlines were received by Office of The Ombudsman and there is no need to discuss the individual cases in detail.
3.23	(Cases 9–11)	Only three relatively minor complaints were received. No further complaints along these lines were received by the Office of The Ombudsman and the problem has largely been eradicated.
3.31	(Cases 12–14)	These three isolated cases under this category of a nature that can be expected to arise from time to time if nothing else because of the complexities of the demarcation of duties between government departments. The problems were dealt with and no further complaints along these lines were received by the Office of The Ombudsman.
3.39	(Case 15)	There is unlikely to be any real problem in future.
3.42	(Case 16)	By adjusting staff deployment to meet changes in demand, ICC has shown that it is well able to cope with such fluctuations as with the recent increased volume in calls arising from "SARS" and the more recent "Team Clean" initiative.
3.45	Case Observation	By a way of summary, of the 16 cases referred to 50% were resolved prior to this investigation when the relevant system became fully operational. The remainder were isolated examples that arise from time to time and it is worth stressing that the Office of The Ombudsman has received no further complaints of these kinds about the ICC and that the ICC itself receives only a miniscule percentage of complaints per month (0.01%) from the 90,000 plus calls per month it handles.
4.19	Standard template for updating knowledge base	Free format has been adopted.
4.22	Maintenance of knowledge base	Assertion of insufficient experience and training of ICC agents in using knowledge base is not supported by facts. ICC intends to undertake annual reviews of each department's knowledge base; reviewing both the accuracy and sufficiency of the information and the ease with which it provides support to ICC agents. These reviews will involve both ICC agents and client departments. Changes will be tested and staff training given as necessary.

Paragraph	Issues	Comments
4.30	Misassignment of cases	Assertion of making the same mistake repeatedly is not supported by facts.
4.31	Emergency calls	EU explained that the Hong Kong Police Force, the principal department responsible for 999 calls, had determined that the current arrangement is the right one and there is no reason to discuss this arrangement basing on opinions from anonymous departments.
4.33	Case management	New measures will be implemented in July 2003. Departments would have sufficient time to deal with a reassigned case.
4.36	Back-office workload	There is no evidence that departments' workloads have been increased compared with public demands on them prior to implementation of ICC; misassignment is probably more a departmental responsibility, which ICC is working with them to resolve.
4.38	Staff training	Assertion of insufficient staff training is unsubstantiated.
4.41	Staff training	There will be less knowledge in depth of a wider range of departments. On the other hand, agents gain familiarity of the work of government as a whole and are better able to ensure that an enquiry goes to the right department. ICC agents are able to answer in excess of 90% of enquiries without recourse to departments and departments provide guidelines to aid assignment of unresolved cases to departmental officers.
4.42	Generalisation	This is one instance where private sector experience is not relevant. A fundamental objective of ICC is to aid the public by providing simple access to Government as a whole, not to individual client department's there is also no evidence that departmental specialisation would make for greater efficiency rather the evidence is that if would reduce efficiency and effectiveness.
4.45	Specialisation	The performance statistics and public satisfaction survey show the successfulness of ICC.
4.46	Service level	There were fluctuations in performance during the development phase of ICC. Performance statistics since full operation, however, show that these are a thing of the past. There have been no "Manpower problems" – lessons have been learned about the need to deploy staff flexibly as workloads fluctuate either because of taking on new clients or when dealing with ad hoc support request such as that for "SARS" or "Team Clean".
4.47	Retention of ICC agents	ICC has had no difficulty in recruitment or retention, nor is there any evidence that ICC agents have become bored, do not perform effectively or have an inadequate understanding of Government or of client departments

Paragraph	Issues	Comments
4.51	Call center identity	Publicity for the "1823 Citizen's Easy Link" will be fully launched in July 2003.
4.54	Accountability	The generally excellent performance of the ICC serves to enhance the reputation of its clients. Nonetheless, ICC provides departments with statistics on any complaints; ensures that appropriate action is taken, including staff coaching or warning; and gives a full apology to the complainant in the same name as the enquiry was dealt with (irrespective as to whether any fault lies with the department or ICC).
4.55	Staff complaint	The current arrangements reflect appropriately the client agent relationship as well as the fact that, whether contracting work to an internal or external agency, any department retains the ultimate responsibility to the public for its agent's actions.
4.56	Accountability	As "1823 Citizen's Easy Link" is fully publicised and becomes the dominant name under which ICC operates the partnership between ICC and its client department will become more apparent to the public.
4.57-59	Personal data privacy	The only personal data, which falls within the definition of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance, that is sometimes provided by enquirers to ICC is limited to Name (if the full name is given), Telephone Number, Address and Identity Card Number. This information is only obtained sometimes and only to the extent required to respond to an enquiry or complaint or is normally requested by the relevant department with respect to a particular type of enquiry. EU sough for legal advice from The Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data and confirmed that there is no breach of the Ordinance so long as the information is used for no other purpose than to deal with the enquiry. If in some future date, ICC were to take on client department responsibilities that required the collection of more sensitive personal data (e.g. household income, welfare status or health records), then it would be essential that ICC clarified to the caller concerned that they were not talking to the department itself. ICC agrees with this even though it may not be a requirement of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance.
4.60-62	One-stop service	A single number for all general enquiries and complaints remains the long-term objective; but adding another layer of agents ("switchboard operator") would make the system less not more helpful to callers. Callers would be required to explain their enquiries/complaints to two separate people (one switchboard operator and an agent in the specialised team); they would run a risk of having their call misassigned by the "switchboard operator"; they would have to join another queue if all the agents in the specialised team are engaged, and they would have to be move from one agent to another - with yet more waiting – if they had enquiries covering more than one department.

Paragraph	Issues	Comments
4.63	Departmental call centre	It will probably remain desirable for some departments to retain their own call centres – or at least to have a dedicated team of agents - managing and responding, for example, to callers' enquiries on highly technical matters or personal cases. This is in no way incompatible with the role of ICC. Indeed, ICC provides out of hours services and deals with simple enquiries and taking messages to be responded by the non-participating departments during working hours. Individual call centres will not be able to perform the function of ICC; they could not provide the efficiency gains that ICC provides; and trying to combine them via telephony into a virtual integrated call centre would run into precisely the same problems of misassignment, repeated enquiry and further queuing that having "switchboard operators" would face.
4.66	Management culture	Low staff turnover and customer satisfaction with the manner of call centre agents, as per survey, indicate that there is no general problem of staff morale. In the light of this, it is unacceptable to report on general impressions and a single letter without carrying out a proper assessment.
4.68	Retention of ICC agents	ICC recognises the need to retain good staff and have planned to set up the following motivation measures: ➢ a staff motivation scheme under which outstanding agents will be rewarded; ➢ a monthly presentation ceremony cum informal gathering; ➢ a recreation group staffed by agents; ➢ weekly tea gatherings where agents can raise their problems with management in an informal setting; ➢ workshops on "how to deal with very difficult customers"; ➢ a course for agents to teach them how to deal with the pressure of customers' demands; ➢ an annual retreat day so as to strengthen communication with staff and enhance their commitment; ➢ considering the feasibility and timing of conducting a staff satisfaction survey; and ➢ will develop Vision, Mission and Values statements for the ICC to enhance their service culture and staff's commitment to the corporate identity.
4.71	Working relationship	Initially, departments were asked to join ICC on the basis of providing a one-stop service in the area of environmental hygiene and cleanliness; subsequently many of those departments requested that ICC take over other hotlines as well. In addition, other non-participating departments have sought support from the ICC, including for one–off and special needs e.g. Tourism Commission, "SARS" and "Team Clean". No department has been pressured into joining.

Paragraph	Issues	Comments
4.73	Difficulty in contacting ICC management	At times due to work demands, Duty managers are not always available, and they have provided departments with other channels of communication – email, which is often more appropriate given the generally routine nature of the communications in question (e.g. a request for reassignment), or for more urgent matters the 'phone number of the ICC's Executive Manager. ICC management says it is conscious of the need to reduce any causes of friction between it and client departments and has or plans to implement the following measures to address the most prominent of these: case monitoring by ICC; and the misassignment and especially the so-called "premature" escalation. ➢ Added a title to each case referred to departmental officers (February 2003); ➢ Introduced monitoring mechanism for repeated complaints (June 2003); ➢ Centralised the case assignment for any departments having a large number of subject officers (May 2003); ➢ Will introduce new assignment and re-assignment arrangements (June/July 2003); and ➢ Will introduce a web-based case workflow system to facilitate case updating and retrieval (September 2003). Apart from the above, ICC have organised visits to departments and also invited departmental officers to visit ICC in order to enhance mutual understanding. On training of ICC management staff, EU has sponsored a manager to attend a widely recognised course, which is as a benchmark for the industry. EU will continue to sponsor management staff to attend appropriate courses.